

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Bernard O'Dowd**

**- poems -**

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### **Bernard O'Dowd (11 April 1866 – 1 September 1953)**

Bernard O'Dowd was born in Beaufort, Victoria, Australia in 1866. He was a child prodigy that read Milton's, "Paradise Lost", at age 8. He was employed as a head teacher at a Catholic School in Ballarat, but was dismissed for heresy. He opened up his own school in Beaufort. In 1886, at age 20, he moved to Melbourne where he found employment in 1887 as an Assistant - Librarian in the Supreme Court Library, working for the Victorian colonial and State government until 1935, retiring as Chief Parliamentary Draughtsman.

He joined the Melbourne Lyceum, the educational and social arm of the Australian Secular Society in 1886. In 1888, a number of anarchists associated with the A.S.A, who were members of the Melbourne Anarchist club (Australia's first anarchist group formed in 1886) were expelled from the A.S.A. O'Dowd joined the progressive Lyceum, which was made up of the anarchists Monty Miller, Upham, Brookhouse and Nicholls, as well as other radical members who had been expelled from the Melbourne Lyceum. He had become the editor of the *Tetor* in 1888 just before the split.

His poem "Hoist the Flag" Lyceum published in the *Lyceum Tutor* in 1888, outlined ideas that were very similar to anarchism. O'Dowd had become a friend of the Melbourne anarcho-communist Jack Andrews, and in 1897, O'Dowd and two others set up the radical paper *Tocsin*. In 1898, he was co-editor of *Tocsin* with Jack Andrews. He continued to be an editor, contributor and financial supporter of *Tocsin* until Andrews died of tuberculosis in 1903. During these six years, he published numerous radical poems, and used the pages of the *Tocsin* to express his opposition to Federation and The Boer War. In 1902, he issued a pamphlet "Conscience and Democracy" which opposed the Boer War.

Like Chummy Fleming who protested the opening of the first parliament in 1901, O'Dowd saw grave problems in Federation and wrote a clause by clause critique of the draft Federal Bill. He saw State/Federal rivalry as a future danger to working people. He warned of the unspecified powers given to the Governor General, which were ultimately used by Sir John Kerr, the CIA's 'Our Man in Australia', in dismissing the Whitlam Labor Government in 1975.

Between 1903 to 1921, O'Dowd turned his attention to poetry and published six poetry books. *Dawnward* (1903), *The Silent Land* (1906), *Dominion of the Boundary* (1907), *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1909), *The Bush* (1912) and *Alma Venus* (1921). His most well known pamphlet "a plea for purpose in poetry", *Poetry Militant*, was published in 1909. In it he asks, "Why should poetry be militant nowadays? I hear some ask Because This is an Age of Revolt and Reconstruction, because the Poet is the father and mother of wise rebellion

and because he, being in touch with the Infinite, the Permanent is most potent and far-reaching stimulator of Reconstruction".

O'Dowd was married and had five sons. In 1920, he left his wife and moved in with Marie Pitt, the editor of the Victorian Socialist and also a poet. He lived with her until her death in 1948. He and Pitt became members of the Unitarian church, denied the trinity and saw the historical Jesus Christ as an anarchist.

Although O'Dowd grappled constantly with the conflict between his work for the government and his radical politics, according to the Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB) "His optimism about human destiny never failed", and a few months before his death at 87, "he affirmed his almost religious belief in anarchist communism.

## Australia

LAST sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space,  
Are you a drift Sargasso, where the West  
In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?  
Or Delos of a coming Sun-God's race?  
Are you for Light, and trimmed, with oil in place,  
Or but a Will o' Wisp on marshy quest?  
A new demesne for Mammon to infest?  
Or lurks millennial Eden 'neath your face?

The cenotaphs of species dead elsewhere  
That in your limits leap and swim and fly,  
Or trail uncanny harp-strings from your trees,  
Mix omens with the auguries that dare  
To plant the Cross upon your forehead sky,  
A virgin helpmate Ocean at your knees.

Bernard O'Dowd

## Envy

Black drips the ooze that you secrete on all  
That Honour's burin graves or Love holds dear:  
At sacrifice you laugh, at virtue sneer,  
And sour rebellion's must, the waking thrall  
Would ripen into Freedom, with the gall  
Of green suspicion. God of drones, you hear  
Mutter of plots in all Success: on seer  
And saint behold your own foul motives crawl.  
O Gluttony that would but dare not gorge!  
Theft of the heart that dreads the handcuff! Hate,  
Too cowardly to hurl the bolts you forge!  
And Lust that fears to pluck the flowers you smell!  
Too low your lintel to seduce the great!  
The meanest of the Seven doors of Hell!

Bernard O'Dowd

## Last Stanzas of the Bush

WHERE is Australia, singer, do you know?  
These sordid farms and joyless factories,  
Mephitic mines and lanes of pallid woe?  
Those ugly towns and cities such as these  
With incense sick to all unworthy power,  
And all old sin in full malignant flower?  
No! to her bourn her children still are faring:  
She is a temple that we are to build:  
For her the ages have been long preparing:  
She is a prophecy to be fulfilled!

All that we love in olden lands and lore  
Was signal of her coming long ago!  
Bacon foresaw her, Campanella, More,  
And Plato's eyes were with her star aglow!  
Who toiled for Truth, whate'er their countries were,  
Who fought for Liberty, they yearned for her!  
No corsair's gathering ground, nor tryst for schemers,  
No chapman Carthage to a huckster Tyre,  
She is the Eldorado of old dreamers,  
The Sleeping Beauty of the world's desire.

She is the scroll on which we are to write  
Mythologies our own and epics new:  
She is the port of our propitious flight  
From Ur idolatrous and Pharaoh's crew.  
She is our own, unstained, if worthy we,  
By dream, or god, or star we would not see:  
Her crystal beams all but the eagle dazzle.  
Her wind-wide ways none but the strong-winged sail:  
She is Eutopia, she is Hy-Brasil,  
The watchers on the tower of morning hail!

Yet she shall be as we, the Potter, mould:  
Altar or tomb, as we aspire, despair:  
What wine we bring shall she, the chalice, hold:  
What word we write shall she, the script, declare:  
Bandage our eyes, she shall be Memphis, Spain:  
Barter our souls, she shall be Tyre again:  
And if we pour on her the red oblation,  
All o'er the world shall Asshur's buzzards throng:  
Love-lit, her Chaos shall become Creation:  
And dewed with dream, her silence flower in song.

Bernard O'Dowd

## Love and Sacrifice

CAN we not consecrate  
To man and God above  
This volume of our great  
Supernal tide of love?

'Twere wrong its wealth to waste  
On merely me and you,  
In selfish touch and taste,  
As other lovers do.

This love is not as theirs:  
It came from the Divine,  
Whose glory still it wears,  
And print of Whose design.

The world is full of woe,  
The time is blurred with dust,  
Illusions breed and grow,  
And eyes' and flesh's lust.

The mighty league with Wrong  
And stint the weakling's bread;  
The very lords of song  
With Luxury have wed.

Fair Art deserts the mass,  
And loiters with the gay;  
And only gods of brass  
Are popular to-day.

Two souls with love inspired,  
Such lightning love as ours,  
Could spread, if we desired,  
Dismay among such powers:

Could social stables purge  
Of filth where festers strife:  
Through modern baseness surge  
A holier tide of life.

Yea, two so steeped in love  
From such a source, could draw  
The angels from above  
To lead all to their Law.

We have no right to seek  
Repose in rosy bower,  
When Hunger thins the cheek  
Of childhood every hour:

Nor while the tiger, Sin,  
'Mid youths and maidens roams,

Should Duty skulk within  
These selfish cosy homes.

Our place is in the van  
With those crusaders, who  
Maintain the rights of man  
'Gainst despot and his crew.

If sacrifice may move  
Their load of pain from men,  
The greatest right of Love  
Is to renounce It then.

Ah, Love, the earth is woe's  
And sadly helps needs:  
And, till its burden goes,  
Our work is—where it bleeds.

Bernard O'Dowd

## Love's Substitute

This love, that dares not warm before its flame  
Our yearning hands, or from its tempting tree  
Yield fruit we may consume, or let us claim  
In Hymen's scroll of happy heraldry  
The twining glyphs of perfect you and me --  
May kindle social fires whence curls no blame,  
Find gardens where no fruits forbidden be,  
And mottoes weave, unsullied by a shame.

For, love, unmothered Childhood wanly waits  
For such as you to cherish it to Youth:  
Raw social soils untilled need Love's own verve  
That Peace a-flower may oust their weedy hates:  
And where Distress would faint from wolfish sleuth  
The perfect lovers' symbol is "We serve!"

Bernard O'Dowd

## May Day

Come Jack, our place is with the ruck  
On the open road today,  
Not with the tepid "footpath sneak"  
Or with the wise who stop away.

A straggling, tame procession, perhaps,  
A butt for burgess scorn;  
Its flags are ragged sentiments,  
And its music's still unborn.

Though none respectable are here,  
And trim officials ban,  
Our duty, Jack, is not with them,  
But here with Hope and Man.

Nor have we cause for shame, who see,  
In the glory-lighted street,  
The Old Brigade of Liberty  
The partial ranks complete.

There's Shelley, Byron, arm in arm,  
With Schiller, Uhland, near:  
While cheek by jowl with anarch "crank"  
See young Camille appear.

Marat keeps line with Spartacus,  
Lone Dantes grimly stalk;  
The meagre Knights of Labour "push"  
With the Twelve Apostles walk.

Bakunin, Marx, Lassalle are there,  
Grey Whitman's with the Greeks,  
Dutch "Beggars" chums with Ironside,  
Or to Bastille hero speaks.

Valliant and Brutus, Vane, Kossuth,  
Find here a fitting tryst;  
That Yarra-banker far ahead  
Is keeping step with Christ.

Before, behind, around, surge on  
Those unknown Great, whose yeast,  
Impermeant, ensures result,  
Tho' Hope's own song had ceased.

With flowers today the sky's festooned;  
To yearning hosts a-sigh  
On winds perfumed with memories  
May's fair-winged forecasts fly.

No longer prostitute to Wealth,  
among the aery show

The Lyric Muse accompanies  
The Marseillaise below.

And how the gales of Freedom move,  
Like wildfire's leap and fall,  
Or north wind's through autumnal grass,  
The red flags over all.

Yes! Ther's our place, whatever flames  
Those nearing clouds display,  
Tho' much they mean to footpath sneaks  
And the wise who stop away.

Bernard O'Dowd

## **Our Duty**

Yet what were Love if man remains unfree,  
And woman's sunshine sordid merchandise:  
If children's Hope is blasted ere they see  
Its shoots of youth from out the branchlets rise:  
If thought is chained, and gagged is Speech, and Lies  
Enthroned as Law befoul posterity,  
And haggard Sin's ubiquitous disguise  
Insults the face of God where'er men be?

Ay, what were Love, my love, did we not love  
Our stricken brothers so, as to resign  
For Its own sake, the foison of Its dower:  
That, so, we two may help them mount above  
These layers of charnel air in which they pine,  
To seek with us the Presence and the Power?

Bernard O'Dowd

## Proletaria

THE SUNNY rounds of Earth contain  
An obverse to its Day,  
Our fertile Vagrancy's domain,  
Wan Proletaria.

From pole to pole of Poverty  
We stumble through the years,  
With hazy-lanterned Memory  
And Hope that never nears.

Wherever Plenty's crop invites  
Our pitiful brigades,  
Lurk cannoneers of Vested Rights,  
Juristic ambuscades;

And here hangs Rent, that squalid cage  
Within which Mammon thrusts,  
Bound with the fetter of a wage,  
The helots of his lusts.

With palsied Doubt as guide, we wind  
Among the lanes of Need,  
Where meagre Hungers scouting find  
But slavered baits of Greed.

The wet-lipped Lamias of Caste,  
Awaiting our advance,  
Our choicest squadrons' fealty blast  
With magic smile and glance:

Delilah-limbed temptations flit  
Among our drowsy rows,  
And on our willing captains fit  
The badges of our foes.

What wonder sometimes if in stealth  
Our starker outposts wait,  
And, in the prowling eyes of Wealth,  
Dash vitriol of Hate;

Or if our Samsons, ere too late,  
Their treasons should make good  
By whelming in the temple's fate  
Their viper owners' brood!

Our polyandrous dam has borne  
To Satan and to God  
The hordes of Night, the clans of Morn,  
That through our valleys plod.

Ah, motherhood of misery  
For Christ-child as for pest!

The greater her fertility  
The drier grows her breast!

Too many linger on the track;  
A few outstrip the time:  
Some, God has tattooed yellow, black,  
And some disguised with crime.

Art's living archives here abound,  
Carraras of Despair,  
And those weird masks of Sight and Sound  
The Tragic Muses wear.

Tho' blind and dull, 'tis we supply  
The Painter's dazzling dreams;  
The rolling flood of Poetry  
From our dumb chaos streams.

Nay, when your world is over-tired,  
And Genius comatose,  
Our race, by Nemesis inspired,  
Old Order overthrows:

With earthquake-life we thrill your land,  
Refill the cruse of Art,  
Revitalize spent Wisdom, and—  
Resume our weary part.

The palace of successful Guilt  
Is mortared with our shame;  
On hecatombs of Us are built  
The soaring towers of Fame.

We are the gnomes of Titan works  
Whose throbbings never cease;  
Our unregarded signet lurks  
On every masterpiece.

The floating isles, that shuttling tie  
All peoples into one  
By adept steermen's sorcery  
Of magnet, steam, and sun;

Religion's dolmens, Sphinxes, spires,  
Her Biblic armouries;  
The helot lightning of the wires  
That mesh your lands and seas;

The viaducts 'tween Near and Far,  
Whereon, o'er range and mead,  
Bacchantic Trade's triumphant car  
And iron tigers speed;

The modern steely crops that rise  
Where technic Jasons sow:  
—All these but feebly symbolize  
The largesse we bestow.

And our reward? In this wan land,  
In clientage of Greed,  
Despised, polluted, maimed and banned,  
To wander and—to breed

Bernard O'Dowd

## **Sloth (I) & (II)**

### **Sloth (I)**

Too many a Samsan lip your teeth indent:  
Too many a Sybil girl you lure to make  
The Great Refusal for a fireside sake:  
And glamoured poet many a look has sent  
Into those eyeballs bear-brown, somnolent,  
Nor dreamed that devils in each muddy lake  
Were sucking his devotion in to slake  
The furrowed belly of your fanged content!  
Religion's bane and Freedom's subtlest foe!  
Behold the popped freight your barges bring  
The dim-lit souls that crave the prophet's gleam,  
Or fettered people's writhing 'neath their woe--  
Gossamer clips and thriftless harvesting  
Of phantom flocks and shadowy tilth of dream!

### **Sloth (II)**

My dreams dissolve the day's illusive net:  
While crested Action's billows blinding beat,  
Omniscient Eyes in troughs of Faith I meet:  
I wait with ancient stars until they set  
Lest forward progress should their runes forget:  
I am the rest that makes the bar complete:  
And, in the shackled body of Defeat,  
The womb of Baby Triumph living yet!  
I am the blende of sleeping radiance:  
The Siding where belated Industry  
Draws from a Silent Tank tomorrow's zest:  
Prophetic Art's preparatory Trance:  
Dilating Force's Sabbath systole:  
The Night of Brahm when worn Creators rest!

Bernard O'Dowd

## The Cow

THIS is a rune I ravelled in the still,  
Arrogant stare of an Australian cow—  
'These pranked intruders of the hornless brow,  
Puffed up with strange illusions of their skill  
To fence, to milk, to fatten and to kill,  
Once worshipped me with temple, rite and vow,  
Crowned me with stars, and bade rapt millions bow  
Before what abject guess they called my will!

'To-day, this flunkey of my midden, Man,  
Throws child-oblations in my milking byre,  
Stifles in slums to spare me lordly fields,  
Flatters with spotless consorts my desire,  
And for a pail of cream his birth-right yields,  
As once in Egypt, Hellas, Ind, Iran!'

Bernard O'Dowd

## The Poet

THEY tell you the poet is useless and empty the sound of his lyre,  
That science has made him a phantom, and thinned to a shadow his fire:  
Yet reformer has never demolished a dungeon or den of the foe  
But the flame of the soul of a poet pulsed in every blow.

They tell you he hinders with tinklings, with gags from an obsolete stage,  
The dramas of deed and the worship of Laws in a practical age:  
But the deeds of to-day are the children of magical dreams he has sung,  
And the Laws are ineffable Fires that from niggardly heaven he wrung!

The bosoms of women he sang of are heaving to-day in our maids:  
The God that he drew from the Silence our woes or our weariness aids:  
Not a maxim has needled through Time, but a poet had feathered its shaft,  
Not a law is a boon to the people but he has dictated its draft.

And why do we fight for our fellows? For Liberty why do we long?  
Because with the core of our nerve-cells are woven the lightnings of song!  
For the poet for ages illumined the animal dreams of our sires,  
And his Thought-Become-Flesh is the matrix of all our unselfish desires!

Yea, why are we fain for the Beautiful? Why should we die for the Right?  
Because through the forested æons, in spite of the priests of the Night,  
Undeterred by the faggot or cross, uncorrupted by glory or gold,  
To our mothers the poet his Vision of Goodness and Beauty has told.

When, comrades, we thrill to the message of speaker in highway or hall,  
The voice of the poet is reaching the silenter poet in all:  
And again, as of old, when the flames are to leap up the turrets of Wrong,  
Shall the torch of the New Revolution be lit from the words of a Song

Bernard O'Dowd

## True America's Message

OUR manlier spirits hear and will obey  
The Word YOU waft Australia o'er the sea—  
'Be true, be brave, be merciful, be free!'  
Not you, who, braggart, sent this wan array  
Of hell-ships vomiting their Will-to-Slay,       5  
These armoured Hates and pallid Envies we,  
'Mid rattled mobs and flags hysteric, see  
Tarnish the chaste horizon of our Bay:

But YOU we hear, our Comrades of the Cause,  
Who face hyæna Mammon in his den:       10  
And YOU, who dared your seas of blood to spill  
To drag the swooning slave from vampire jaws:  
Yea, YOU who freed unborn Australia, when  
You singed King George's beard at Bunker's Hill.

Bernard O'Dowd

## Young Democracy

HARK! Young Democracy from sleep  
Our careless sentries raps:  
A backwash from the Future's deep  
Our Evil's foreland laps.

Unknown, these Titans of our Night  
Their New Creation make:  
Unseen, they toil and love and fight  
That glamoured Man may wake.

Knights-errant of the human race,  
The Quixotes of to-day,  
For man as man they claim a place,  
Prepare the tedious way.

They seek no dim-eyed mob's applause,  
Deem base the titled name,  
And spurn, for glory of their Cause,  
The tawdry nymphs of Fame.

No masks of ignorance or sin  
Hide from them you or me:  
We're Man—no colour shames our skin,  
No race or caste have we.

The prognathous Neanderthal,  
To them, conceals the Bruce;  
They see Dan Aesop in the thrall;  
From swagmen Christ deduce.

Tho' butt for lecher's ribaldry  
And scarred by woman's scorn,  
In baby-burdened girl they see  
God-motherhood forlorn.

With them, to racial siredom glides  
The savage we deprave;  
That eunuch brilliant Narses hides:  
A Spartacus, that slave.

They Jesus find in manger waif;  
In horse-boys Shakespearehood:  
And earthquake-Luthers nestling safe  
In German miner's brood.

The God that pulses everywhere  
They know fills Satan's veins;  
No felon but they see Him there  
Behind His mirror's stains.

'Tis theirs Earth's charnel rooms to clear,  
And ruthless sweep away

The Lares and Penates dear  
To man in his decay.

Their restless energy supplies  
Munitions that will wreck  
The keeps whence feudal enemies  
Our free banditti check.

Their unrelenting wars they wage,  
These Furies of the Right,  
Where myriad Falsehood's legions rage,  
Artilleried by Might;

Where Fashion's stupid iron clamps  
Young Innovation's head,  
And Law the stalwart Present cramps  
In Past's Procrustes-bed;

Where Pride of learning, substance, blood,  
Or prowess in the strife,  
Exacts from teeming lowlihood  
The lion's share of life;

Where Gluttony would to the brutes  
Degrade his loose-lipped gangs;  
Where Tyranny his venom shoots  
From one or million fangs;

Where Cruelty, in Wisdom's mask,  
Piths fame from writhing beasts;  
Where blest is racial Murder's task  
By Christ's apostate priests.

In Punic or in Persian fray  
With Love's and Conscience' foes,  
Unadvertising Romans they,  
And Spartans free from pose.

Abused as mad or traitors by  
The trolls they would eject;  
Cold-shouldered by wan Apathy;  
Of motives mean suspect;

Outcast from social gaities;  
Denied life's liliated grace;  
They mount their hidden Calvaries  
To save the human race.

The bowers of Art a few may know;  
A few wait highly placed:  
Most bear the hods of common woe,  
And some you call disgraced.

But whether in the mob or school,  
In church or poverty,  
They teach and live the Golden Rule  
Of Young Democracy:—

`That culture, joy and goodliness  
Be th' equal right of all:  
That Greed no more shall those oppress  
Who by the wayside fall:

`That each shall share what all men sow:  
That colour, caste's a lie:  
That man is God, however low—  
Is man, however high.'

Bernard O'Dowd